SŪRAH 46

Al-Aḥqāf

(Sand Dunes)

Prologue

The present *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, addresses the question of faith: belief in God's oneness and His absolute Lordship of the universe. As in other Makkan *sūrahs*, faith here also includes belief in the revelation of the Divine message to Muḥammad, God's messenger, who was preceded by other messengers, and to whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high, confirming earlier scriptures. It also includes belief in the resurrection and accountability for all that is done in this present life, whether good or evil.

These are the fundamental principles upon which Islam builds its whole structure. Hence, the Qur'ān elaborates on these principles in all the Makkan *sūrahs*. It also touches upon these aspects in the *sūrahs* revealed later in Madīnah, and specifically whenever it lays down legislation or addresses a directive to the Muslim community. Part of the nature of the Islamic faith is that it considers belief in God's oneness, Muḥammad's message and accountability in the life to come the pivot upon which all its principles, systems, laws and morality turn. All are closely related to this belief. Therefore, they remain proactive.

The *sūrah* treats this question of faith in every possible way, presenting it against different backdrops and adding universal, psychological and historical effects. It makes faith a question for all

existence, not merely the human race. It gives us a glimpse of how some of the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, and refers to the attitude of some of the Children of Israel to it, presenting one testimony from uncorrupted human nature and another from some Israelites. It takes us on a journey so that we can look at the expanse of the heavens and the earth, and it also presents images from the Day of Judgement. It further shows us the fate of the people of Hūd, and touches on the fates of some of the townships around Makkah. According to the *sūrah*, both the universe itself and the Qur'ān are books stating the same truth.

The *sūrah* consists of four inter-related parts that can be seen as a single whole. The first part begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā Mīm*, that also began the six *sūrahs* preceding this one. These two letters are immediately followed by a reference to the book of the Qur'ān and its being a revelation from God: "*This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) The *sūrah* follows this with a reference to the book of the universe, which is established on the basis of His truth and created according to elaborate planning. "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, the recited book of the Qur'ān and the book of the universe we behold confirm the truth as well as the elaborate planning: "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3)

After this powerful and comprehensive opening, the *sūrah* begins to present the question of faith, starting with a denunciation of polytheism, upheld by the pagan Arabs, demonstrating that it lacks all basis in the universe, and that it further lacks true pronouncement and inherited knowledge: "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4) It shows the error of the one who worships instead of God someone or thing who cannot hear or respond to its worshipper and who disputes with him on the Day of Judgement dissociating itself from all such worship.

It then speaks of the appalling reception they gave to the truth as presented by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), describing it as plain sorcery. (Verse 7) They even had the temerity to go further than this and alleged that the Prophet had fabricated it all. The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to give them a reply that suits his position as a messenger of God, one that reflects his fear of God and accepts His judgement both in this world and the next: "*Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verses 8–9) It also cites the attitude of some of the Children of Israel who accepted the Qur'ān as true guidance when they found in it what confirmed the scriptures given to Moses (peace be upon him). Such a person "*has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance.*" (Verse 10) They are, thus, denounced for their wrongdoing, for their disbelief, despite the testimony of those endowed with greater knowledge: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* also mentions the unbelievers' flimsy justification of their attitude as they said in reference to the believers: "*If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.*" (Verse 11) This explains their true stance: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* also refers to the book of Moses and the fact that the Qur'ān confirms it, highlighting its role: "*to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12) This part concludes with details of the good news given to those who believe in God and follow the right course: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verses 13–14)

The second part of the *sūrah* portrays two patterns of human nature, one upright and the other deviant, highlighting their different attitudes to the question of faith. It depicts both natures as they commence their lives, reared by their parents. It describes their respective attitudes

when they come of age and are able to make their own choices. The first recognizes God's blessings, is dutiful towards his parents, eager to give thanks, and seeking forgiveness for slips and mistakes: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) The other is disobedient of both his parents and God, denies the Day of Resurrection, and creates tremendous distress for his parents: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a swift scene of the Day of Judgement portraying the fate of this second type of person: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20)

In the third part, the *sūrah* speaks of the destruction of the ʿĀd after they had rejected all warnings. It highlights the great wind which they had expected to give them rain and growth. Instead, it brought them ruin and the punishment they had hastened. "*When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do we requite guilty people.*" (Verses 24–25) In this way, the *sūrah* aims to heighten the unbelievers' feelings by showing them the fate of the ʿĀd, who they are reminded were stronger and wealthier than they. "*We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.*" (Verse 26) As this part comes to an end, the *sūrah* also reminds them of the fate suffered by the townships around them and how their alleged

deities could not provide any support. Thus, their fabrications were clear for everyone to see.

The fourth and final part gives us the story of a group of *jinn* who were directed by God to listen to a recitation of the Qur'ān. They were highly moved by it, immediately declaring that it speaks the truth and confirms "*what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) They went straight back to their people warning them and calling on them to believe: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.*" (Verses 31–32) The *jinn* also refer to the open book of the universe which testifies to God's power of initiation and resurrection: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33) At this point the *sūrah* adds a touching scene, showing the unbelievers as they are brought before the fire. They will then admit what they used to deny, but it is all too late.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient and not to hasten the unbelievers' punishment. They are only given respite for a short while, and God's punishment will inevitably catch up with them: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35)

I

One Universe, One Creator

Al-Aḥqāf (Sand Dunes)

سُورَةُ الأَحْقَاف

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

تَنزِيلُ الْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given. (3)

مَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَمَّآ أُنذِرُوا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Say: 'Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَرُونِى مَاذَا خَلَقُوا۟ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ شِرْكٌ فِى السَّمَٰوَٰتِ ۖ ائْتُونِى بِكِتَٰبٍ

مِن قَبْلِ هَٰذَآ أَوْ أَثَٰرَةٍ مِّنْ عِلْمٍ
إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.' (4)

وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّن يَدْعُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَن
لَّا يَسْتَجِيبُ لَهُۥٓ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ وَهُمْ عَن
دُعَآئِهِمْ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? (5)

وَإِذَا حُشِرَ ٱلنَّاسُ كَانُوا۟ لَهُمْ أَعْدَآءً وَكَانُوا۟
بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٦﴾

When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship. (6)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٍ قَالَ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ هَٰذَا
سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٧﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' (7)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ ۖ قُلْ إِنِ ٱفْتَرَيْتُهُۥ
فَلَا تَمْلِكُونَ لِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۖ
هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تُفِيضُونَ فِيهِ ۖ كَفَىٰ
بِهِۦ شَهِيدًۢا بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ
ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' (8)

قُلْ مَا كُنتُ بِدْعًا مِّنَ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي
مَا يُفْعَلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ ۖ إِنْ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰ
إِلَيَّ وَمَا أَنَا إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.' (9)

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ
وَكَفَرْتُم بِهِ وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ
بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ عَلَىٰ مِثْلِهِ فَآمَنَ
وَاسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي
الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' (10)

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
لَوْ كَانَ خَيْرًا مَّا سَبَقُونَا إِلَيْهِ ۚ وَإِذْ لَمْ
يَهْتَدُوا بِهِ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا
إِفْكٌ قَدِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' (11)

وَمِن قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا
وَرَحْمَةً ۚ وَهَٰذَا كِتَابٌ مُّصَدِّقٌ
لِّسَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا
وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (12)

Those who say, 'Our Lord is God', and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (13)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do. (14)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

In Line with the Truth

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.* (Verses 1–3)

As the *sūrah* opens it touches on the link between the letters of the Arabic language they speak and the Qur'ān, a book composed of the same letters but unlike anything people say or write. This, in itself, is sufficient evidence to testify to the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. It also touches on the relationship between God's recited book and the book of the universe we behold and which He made. Both books are made with the truth and according to careful planning. The fact that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by the Almighty testifies to His power and absolute wisdom. Likewise, the creation of the universe is an act of truth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth.*" (Verse 3) It is subject to elaborate planning: "*and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, God's purpose behind creation is fulfilled and all that He has willed through the process of creation is accomplished.

Both books are open, available to ears and eyes to contemplate. Each testifies to God's power and wisdom, indicating His planning. Indeed the book of the universe affirms the truth of the revealed book and its

promises and warnings. "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3) This is indeed most singular.

The revealed book states that the Godhead is One and that He is the Lord of everything, since He is the Creator who controls and determines all. The book of the universe also affirms this same truth: its system, balance and harmony confirm that the Maker is the One who makes everything on the basis of comprehensive and unerring knowledge. Indeed, everything bears the same mark of the One Maker. How can anyone then claim that there are deities other than Him? What have such alleged deities created? What share do they have in the universe? "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4)

Thus, God instructs His messenger to put before people the testimony of the book of the universe, as it admits no dispute and addresses human nature according to its own logic. "*Show me what part of the earth they have created.*" No one will ever say that such worshipped deities, be they statues made of stone, trees, *jinn*, angels or any other, ever created any part of the earth or anything that lives on earth. Human nature flies in the face of anyone making such a suggestion. "*Or which share of the heavens they own?*" (Verse 4) Nor will any human being claim that any worshipped deity has ever had any share in the creation of the heavens, or that they own any share in them. A glance at the sky is sufficient to fill our hearts with a clear sense of the Creator's greatness and oneness, and to discard all deviant beliefs and absurdities. God, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, knows the effect of contemplating the universe on people's minds and hearts. Therefore, He directs us to look at the book of the universe and listen to its message.

Some people, however, make assertions that rely on neither proof nor evidence. The Qur'ān does not allow them much leeway in this respect. Instead it requires that they provide evidence and proof in support of their claims and teaches them the method of proof putting before them a complete system of consideration, reflection and conclusion drawing: "*Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other*

vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true." (Verse 4) Thus, they have to rely either on a true book revealed by God, or a proved piece of evidence that has survived over time. All books revealed before the Qur'ān emphatically assert the oneness of God, the Creator. None of them assigns even a shred of validity to the legends that speak of multiple deities, or suggests that they have any share in the creation of the earth or the ownership of the heavens. Nor is there any vestige of knowledge to support such absurd claims.

Thus the Qur'ān puts before them the testimony of the universe, which is clear and decisive, discounts any claim that has no supporting evidence and teaches them the method of proof; all this in one verse using a small number of words, but with strong rhythm and sound argument.

The Qur'ān also invites them to take an objective look at those beings alleged to be deities. It points to the obvious error behind such claims when these entities can neither respond to them nor show any awareness of them in this present life. Furthermore, they will stand against the unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, denying all their claims:

> *Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship.* (Verses 5–6)

Some of the unbelievers considered their idols to be deities, either in themselves or as statues representing the angels. Others worshipped trees while still others worshipped the angels directly or even Satan. Yet none of these so-called deities respond to those invoking them, or at least make a useful response. Statues and trees give no response whatsoever, angels do not respond to anyone who associates partners with God, while the devils' response is only one of whispering and leading people astray. Then, on the Day of Resurrection, when all are gathered before their Lord, all alleged deities disown their errant worshippers. Even Satan disowns them, as clearly stated in another *sūrah*: *"And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say:*

'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store." (14: 22)

Thus, after having explained to them the universal truth that rejects their claims, the Qur'ān puts their own claims before their eyes, showing them what effect these claims have in this world and in the life to come. In both, the truth of God's oneness is clearly seen as the book of the universe proves it. The idolaters should espouse this if they care about what happens to them in this life and in the life to come.

This strong denunciation of idolatry referred, at the time of Qur'ānic revelation, to the deities worshipped by different communities during different periods of history. However, the Qur'ānic statements in this case have a broader significance and farther application than the historical situation then pertaining. What error is greater than one creature invoking another instead of God, at any time and place? Every creature thus invoked, regardless of its identity and status, will not and cannot make any response to those who invoke it. It is God alone who does what He wants. Polytheism is not limited to the naïve form practised by the idolaters of old. Many are those who associate with God partners from among people who have power, influence, wealth or position; they appeal to them for help. Yet these are also too weak to make any significant response to their appealers. None has any power to cause benefit or harm even to themselves. Appealing to them, placing hope in them and fearing them are all forms of subtle idolatry, which is unfortunately practised by many even though they do not recognize it as such.

A Wild Claim

The *sūrah* now discusses their attitude towards the Prophet and his true message, establishing the truth of revelation as it has already established the truth of God's oneness:

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner. Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (Verses 7–12)

The *sūrah* first rebukes them for the reception they gave to God's revelations when it is given 'in all clarity', free of ambiguity, leaving no room for doubt. Besides, it presents the indisputable truth. Yet they describe this revelation as '*plain sorcery*'. As we all know, truth is vastly different from sorcery; the two cannot be confused or viewed in the same way. Thus the *sūrah* begins its discussion by refuting their ridiculous claims.

It then picks up on their other claim alleging that the Prophet had '*invented*' it. It states this in the form of a question, not a report, giving the impression that such a thing cannot be made or at least is unlikely to be made: "*Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'?*" (Verse 8) What a shameless claim! The Prophet is instructed to reply to them in all the politeness that fits his position as a prophet of God, reflecting his understanding of his Lord and his mission, as well as his knowledge of the true power and values in the universe: "*Say: If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of*

what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." (Verse 8)

Essentially, the Prophet is instructed to ask them: how, for whose interest and for what objective would I invent it? Would I invent it so that you can believe in and follow me? If this is the case, you cannot help me in the least against God. He will surely hold me to account. What use would it be to me if you follow me, when you cannot give me the slightest support or protection when God punishes me for such invention?

This is a fit response from a Prophet who is instructed by God, and who recognizes no power in the universe other than His. Besides, it is a logical response which, when objectively considered, appears to the addressees to be truly valid. The Prophet makes this response and leaves them to God for judgement: "*He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it.*" (Verse 8) He is a witness to all that they say and do, and this is enough to ensure a fair judgement: "*Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you.*" Yet, "*He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 8) He may treat you with compassion, bestow His grace on you and guide you, forgiving you your earlier error. It is a response, then, that combines warning with persuasion. It gently touches hearts and makes people realize that the matter is far too serious to be left to their absurdities.

Yet another argument is provided, this time drawing on realities. Why do they reject the idea of a Divine message being given through revelation? Why are they so quick to denounce it as sorcery or as an invention, when there is nothing strange or unusual about it? "*Say: I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was not a totally new phenomenon: he was one in a line of God's messengers. His situation was the same as all messengers who preceded him. He was an ordinary human being whom God knew to be suited to deliver His message. Therefore, He gave him His revelations and the Prophet carried out God's orders. This is what a Divine message is like. When a messenger of God feels this bond, he does not ask God for proof, nor does he

request anything special for himself; he simply moves on to deliver God's message as it is revealed to him. "*I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me.*" He gets on with the task of delivering his message, not because of any knowledge he has of the realm that lies beyond human perception, nor because of any information given to him about what will happen to him, his people or his message. He simply follows instructions, trusting his Lord, submitting himself to Him. The future is unknown to him; its secrets are with his Lord and he does not seek to know them. He has all the reassurance he needs, and he realizes that the proper attitude for him is not to look beyond the limits of the mission he has been assigned: "*I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

Those advocates of Islam endowed with profound insight into its message follow in the footsteps of the Prophet and find the same reassurance. They carry on with their advocacy of the Divine message seeking neither personal gain nor self interest. They do not know what the future holds for it or for them. They do not ask their Lord for evidence; they have all the evidence they need in their hearts. Nor do they pray for any special favour; it is sufficient favour for them that they follow this line. They discharge their duty, and this is enough for them. They do not overstep the fine line God has demarcated for them.

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers a witness who is close at hand and whose testimony is particularly relevant because he belongs to an earlier Divine religion whose followers are aware of the nature of revelation:

> *Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.'* (Verse 10)

This verse may refer to one or more of the Jews who, knowing the nature of the Torah, recognized that the Qur'ān had the same nature as earlier revealed books and, therefore, declared themselves believers in Islam. There are reports that it refers specifically to 'Abdullāh ibn

Sallām. However, this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, and ʿAbdullāh ibn Sallām only adopted Islam when the Prophet later migrated to Madīnah. Other reports suggest that this verse was revealed in Madīnah, thus confirming that it refers to this particular individual. Still other reports suggest that the verse was revealed in Makkah and hence would not refer to him. It may also be that the verse refers to a different situation that took place when the Prophet was still advocating his message in Makkah, when a small number of followers of earlier Divine religions adopted Islam. This would have been particularly significant for the idolater Arabs. Hence, the Qur'ān refers to it more than once, delivering a strong counter argument to those idolaters who rejected the Divine message without any basis.

The *sūrah* uses a special style in presenting its argument to them: "*Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it?...*" (Verse 10) It aims to shake their stubborn rejection and raise a fear within them concerning the eventual result. Since there is a possibility that the Qur'ān may really be from God, as Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says, should they not take precautions lest their rejection of it brings them to a terrible end? Could all the warnings it provides come true? Would they not be better advised to reflect on the whole matter lest they leave themselves open to all that it warns them against? Taking such precautions is all the wiser, considering that one or more of the people of Divine faiths confirmed that the Qur'ān is of the same nature as earlier revealed scriptures, and followed this by declaring their belief in it. By contrast, they, whose language the Qur'ān speaks, persist with their rejection. This is indeed blatant wrongdoing as it suppresses the truth. It deserves God's punishment: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* continues to report what the pagan Arabs said about the Qur'ān and Islam. It specifically mentions their arrogance as they try to show themselves as superior to the believers:

> *The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'* (Verse 11)

Among the earliest Muslims were those who were poor and weak in Makkan society. To the arrogant elders of the Quraysh, this was a point of weakness. They boasted: 'had Islam been good, we would have been the first to recognize its goodness. Those others could not have preceded us in following it. Given our positions, knowledge and understanding, we are better equipped to determine what is good.'

Yet this was not so. What stopped them from accepting Islam was not any doubt that they had about it or that they did not recognize how good and sound it was, but rather the fact that they were too proud to follow Muḥammad's lead. They especially feared any loss of their social position or their economic privileges. Moreover they were proud of their ancestors and what they believed in. By contrast, those who were quick to respond to the call of Islam paid little attention to such considerations. Pride always prevents the arrogant from listening to the voice of sound nature; it precludes them from accepting the truth. Pride and arrogance always make people stubborn, urging them to seek hollow excuses and make false claims about the truth and its advocates. They will never acknowledge that they are wrong. Indeed, they put themselves at the centre of life, as if they were the pivot around which life itself turns: *"Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'"* (Verse 11) Since they have not acknowledged the truth, then there must be something wrong with it. They could not make a mistake. They try to impress on the masses what they feel of their own infallibility!

The case for revelation concludes with a reference to Moses' scriptures:

> *Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.* (Verse 12)

The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to its bond with earlier Divine books, particularly the one given to Moses, considering that the one given to Jesus was a complement to the Torah, which contains the basic faith and legislation. Hence, Moses' book is defined as '*a guide*', or *imām* in Arabic, and described as '*grace*'. Indeed, all Divine messages are signs of His grace bestowed on earth and its inhabitants, in every sense of

the word. It is grace and mercy extended throughout this life and in the life to come. This present book, the Qur'ān, "*confirms it in the Arabic tongue.*" It confirms the original source that forms the basis of all Divine religions and also the Divine code of life advocated by all religions. It confirms the true direction shown to humanity to ensure that it remains in contact with its Lord. The reference to its being in Arabic serves to remind the Arabs of God's favour in choosing them to be the bearers of His message to humanity and choosing their language for the Qur'ān. The verse also speaks of the nature and function of the message: "*To warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12)

What Reward for Believers?

At the end of this first part, the *sūrah* describes the reward of those who do good, explaining the good news the Qur'ān gives them, making clear its necessary condition, which is acknowledgement of God's Lordship and its implementation in human life:

> *Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.* (Verses 13–14)

What is required of them is that they say: '*Our Lord is God.*' These are not idle words; indeed, they represent more than belief. They embody a complete system that applies to every step, action and feeling in life. They set up a criterion to judge every thought, event, action, relation, bond and person. Our Lord is God: to Him do we address our worship, it is Him that we seek and it is on Him alone that we rely. Our Lord is God: no one else matters; all our hopes look up to Him, and we fear none but He. Our Lord is God: in every thought, judgement and action we seek His pleasure. Our Lord is God: His is the law we implement, and from Him alone we receive guidance. Our Lord is God: all our bonds with anyone or thing in the whole world are subject to our relation with Him.

"*And follow the straight path.*" (Verse 13) This is the next step that defines a straight line that we should follow with reassurance and steady feelings, entertaining neither doubts nor fears. Thus, actions and behaviour will always be in line with God's code, avoiding pitfalls and resisting all temptations.

So, the statement, '*Our Lord is God,*' outlines a system, and following this system after having consciously chosen it is a higher grade still. Those whom God guides to have both are indeed the best people. Hence, they "*shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 13) Why would they fear anything or grieve over anything when they have a system that leads to God and following it is the best assurance to be with Him?

"*They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verse 14) The phrase '*for what they do*' explains the meaning of the statement, '*our Lord is God*' and diligent following of the system it outlines. It tells us that there is a type of action that earns the reward of abiding in heaven. It is the type of action that results from this particular system and its conscientious implementation. Thus we realize that the words and phrases of faith in Islam are not mere statements to be made verbally. The basic statement, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', denotes a complete system. If it remains no more than a statement, it cannot be the cornerstone of Islam, as it always should be.

Millions of people repeat this declaration today, but it remains no more than words they utter. It produces no effect on their lives. They continue to lead a life based on a system that is akin to paganism while they repeat a declaration that for them remains hollow. To say, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', or 'our Lord is God', is to denote a system of life. This must be clear in our minds so that we can identify this system and follow it.

2

Two Types of Offspring

وَوَصَّيْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ إِحْسَٰنًا ۖ
حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُۥ كُرْهًا وَوَضَعَتْهُ كُرْهًا ۖ
وَحَمْلُهُۥ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ ثَلَٰثُونَ شَهْرًا ۚ
حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَبَلَغَ أَرْبَعِينَ
سَنَةً قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ
نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ
وَٰلِدَىَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَٰلِحًا تَرْضَىٰهُ
وَأَصْلِحْ لِى فِى ذُرِّيَّتِىٓ ۖ إِنِّى تُبْتُ
إِلَيْكَ وَإِنِّى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months. And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (15)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ نَتَقَبَّلُ عَنْهُمْ أَحْسَنَ
مَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَنَتَجَاوَزُ عَن سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ فِىٓ
أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۖ وَعْدَ ٱلصِّدْقِ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them. (16)

وَٱلَّذِى قَالَ لِوَٰلِدَيْهِ أُفٍّ لَّكُمَآ
أَتَعِدَانِنِىٓ أَنْ أُخْرَجَ وَقَدْ خَلَتِ
ٱلْقُرُونُ مِن قَبْلِى وَهُمَا يَسْتَغِيثَانِ
ٱللَّهَ وَيْلَكَ ءَامِنْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ
حَقٌّ فَيَقُولُ مَا هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَٰطِيرُ
ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' (17)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْقَوْلُ فِىٓ
أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ ۖ
إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ خَٰسِرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of *jinn* and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost. (18)

وَلِكُلٍّ دَرَجَٰتٌ مِّمَّا عَمِلُوا۟ ۖ وَلِيُوَفِّيَهُمْ
أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged. (19)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ أَذْهَبْتُمْ
طَيِّبَٰتِكُمْ فِى حَيَاتِكُمُ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱسْتَمْتَعْتُم
بِهَا ۖ فَٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ ٱلْهُونِ بِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.' (20)

Overview

In this part the *sūrah* speaks of human nature when it sticks to the right track and when it deviates, and at what end it arrives in either case. It begins by urging man to remain dutiful to his parents. This instruction often comes in the Qur'ān after it speaks about faith or in conjunction with such discourses. The reason for this is that the bond between children and parents is the strongest and most important after the bond of faith. It is the one that deserves to be honoured. Furthermore, grouping the two bonds together in this way in the Qur'ān makes it clear that the bond of faith takes precedence in human life. It is followed though by the family bond in its closest form.

This part of the *sūrah* gives us a scene portraying two types of human nature. In the first, the two bonds of faith and the one between parent and offspring work together in the same direction, seeking God's acceptance. In the second, the two bonds separate and have no meeting point. In the first case, the children concerned are given the good news of being admitted into heaven, while in the second, they are destined to suffer in hell. An image of the punishment meted out in hell is given, describing the end suffered by the arrogant who are guilty of transgression.

Dutiful to Parents

"*We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents.*" (Verse 15) This is an order given to all mankind, based on the very fact of their being human with no need for any further qualification. They are all enjoined to show kindness in its absolute, unrestricted sense. Mere parenthood requires such absolute kindness. This order comes from the Creator of man, and it appears to apply to the human race in particular. It is unknown among birds, animals or insects for the young to take care of the old. What is clearly observed among these creatures is that by nature the old take care of the young. Nevertheless, this applies only to some species. Hence, the Divine order seems to apply only to man.

This instruction to be kind to one's parents is repeated several times in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's pronouncements. By contrast,

kindness by parents to children occurs only rarely, addressing particular situations. Human nature itself ensures that parents take good care of their children, without the need for any other motivation. Parents often show a remarkable readiness to sacrifice whatever they have for their children, to the point of being willing to die for them. They show no hesitation in all this, seek no recompense, press no favour and expect no thanks. The new generation, however, rarely turns back to take care of the older one who had made such great sacrifices. Indeed, the younger generation moves forward to bring up another new generation and take care of it, making similar sacrifices in the process.

Islam considers the family the basic unit in its social structure. It is the nest where the young are reared, receiving their share of love, and learning the value of mutual cooperation and care. A child who does not have a family to look after it often suffers deprivation in some aspects of its life, even though all sorts of comfort remain available in its environment. The first thing such a child lacks as it grows up in an environment other than that of a family is love. It has been proven that by nature a child loves to have its mother's complete attention during its first two years of life. This cannot be provided in a non-family environment where one carer has to look after several children. In this situation, jealousy is bound to surface, and a grudging seed replaces that of love. Similarly, a child needs to be under one supervisory authority during a certain period of its life; this so that its character remains stable. Again, this cannot be provided anywhere other than the family environment. In a children's home, such an authority is lacking because supervisors work in shifts. Therefore, their charges can only but lack stability. Hence, we can see the wisdom behind making the family the basic unit of the Islamic social structure that meets all the needs of sound human nature.

The Qur'ān describes the mother's willing sacrifice, which cannot be compensated for by her children no matter how well they fulfil God's order to be kind to parents: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months.*" (Verse 15) Here the very words and their rhythm

gives us a clear sense of the difficulty and hard times the mother has to go through: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth.*" In Arabic this sounds akin to a great sigh, made by someone bearing a heavy burden and breathing with difficulty. It, thus reflects the latter stages of pregnancy, as also of labour and birth.

As embryology advances, it reveals to us more and more of the great sacrifice the mother makes during pregnancy. When the egg is fertilized, it clings to the uterus. As it needs to feed, it begins to tear the tissues around it and feed on it. Blood runs to it so that the egg begins now to swim in a pool of the mother's blood, which is rich in nutrients. The egg needs more and more of this blood to grow and develop, and thus it continues to feed on the mother. This means that the mother eats food, digests it and as it enters her blood stream, this, with all its nutrients, feeds the developing embryo. When the embryo begins to develop its bones, it increasingly absorbs calcium from its mother who may suffer a shortage of the same. All this is merely a fraction of what the mother gives to the embryo.

Childbirth is another very difficult process, but its great pain dwindles before natural instinct. The mother is delighted with the fruit it yields, which means giving life to a new shoot of an old tree: a child that starts life as its mother moves on.

Now that the child is born, it needs to be breast-fed and taken much care of. By her milk, the mother gives of her own constitution, and as she takes care of her child, she gives much of her heart and feelings. Yet in giving all of this, she is nothing less than delighted. She is never fed up with all the trouble her child gives her. The best reward she aspires to is to see her child grow in good health. How can anyone compensate a mother for all her sacrifice? "One of the Prophet's Companions was carrying his mother as they did the *ṭawāf*, walking around the Ka'bah, [a ritual of pilgrimage]. He asked the Prophet: 'Have I discharged my duty to her?' The Prophet said: 'No, not even for one sigh she made.'" [Related by al-Bazzār.]

Having given this example of what parents, particularly the mother, do for their children, the *sūrah* now paints an image of a child that has attained maturity, nurturing sound nature and following right guidance:

> *And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.'* (Verse 15)

Here, the Arabic text uses the term *ashudd*, translated here as full manhood, which is between 30 and 40. Indeed at 40, man attains full maturity, when all talents and potentials are at their best and man tends to think and reflect in a relaxed atmosphere. Then, sound human nature begins to reflect on life and what comes after life, thinking of the eventual destiny.

The Qur'ān describes the thoughts and feelings of a person with sound nature as he stands at the end of one half of life and the beginning of another half with an almost apparent end. He, therefore, turns to God with this prayer: "*My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents.*" (Verse 15) It is a prayer from a heart that appreciates the great grace God has bestowed on him, feeling that it is far more than he deserves. He recognizes that such grace was also bestowed in abundance on his parents. He feels that all his efforts are insufficient expression of gratitude for such grace. Therefore, he prays that God will enable him to perform his duty of thanksgiving and not allow his efforts to be wasted on distractions.

In this same prayer, the person who enjoys sound nature prays that God will enable him to "*do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance.*" What he wishes for is to be able to do some work that is so good as to meet with God's pleasure and acceptance. His utmost aim is to earn his Lord's acceptance, for it is in Him that he places all his hopes.

He goes on with his prayer: "*Grant me good descendants.*" This prayer issues from a believer's heart who hopes that his good work will continue with his children and their children and so on. He would love to be sure that his offspring will continue to worship God alone and seek His pleasure. Such goodly descendants are more precious to a believer than the greatest of material treasures. Such a prayer expresses a hope

that children take over from parents in obeying God across many generations.

What he presents in support of his sincere prayer is a request for repentance of any sins and errors and a statement of his full submission to God's will: "*To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.*"

Thus is the attitude of a good servant of God, one equipped with sound, uncorrupted nature. The Qur'ān tells us of how God looks upon such people:

> *It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.* (Verse 16)

The reward is granted on the basis of the best of one's deeds, while bad ones are overlooked. The destination to which such people go is heaven where they join its rightful dwellers. All this is in fulfilment of the true promise they were given in this present life. God's promise is always fulfilled.

To the Other Place

The converse of all this is error and transgression:

> *But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.* (Verses 17–18)

The parents are believers, but the child is disobedient. His first characteristic is that of being undutiful to them, addressing them with arrogance and insolence, hurting their feelings: "*Fie on you both.*" He

then denies the resurrection, citing the hollow argument that no one from past generations has ever come back to life: "*Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?*" (Verse 17) The time of resurrection is determined by God, when all will be resurrected at the same time after this present world has completed its term. No one has ever said that resurrection will take place in instalments, with one generation resurrected during the lifetime of a later one. It is not a game; rather, it is a submitting of final accounts once the journey has come to its final destination.

The parents are shocked by their son's words that mark him out to be a clear disbeliever. They fear the outcome of what he says to God and to them. Therefore, they appeal to him and pray to God for help: "*they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true.'*" (Verse 17) These words give us a clear impression of their dread at the outcome of all this. The child, for his part, however, persists with disbelief and denial, saying: "*All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.*" (Verse 17) His inevitable end overwhelms him: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) The verdict passed on this person and others like him is the punishment incurred by unbelievers. There are large numbers of these across many generations of humans and *jinn*. God's promise which always comes true states that these '*will be utterly lost*'. What greater loss is there than the loss of faith in this life and the loss of God's pleasure in the life to come! Such a loss means inevitable suffering for such unbelievers.

Having given a general idea of the outcome that awaits the two groups, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the accurate accountability of every individual: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19) Every single one has their own grade, according to their deeds.

These two types of people are very common. Indeed, the description almost identifies two particular people to heighten the effect and make each mirror a life situation. There are reports suggesting that each example does refer to a particular case, but none of these carries any

degree of authenticity. It is better, therefore, to consider that they refer to two types rather than two individuals. This is endorsed by the way the *sūrah* comments on their situations. After describing the first type, the *sūrah* says: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) It refers to the second type with a similarly telling comment: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) It finally comments on both types together: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19)

Submitting the Final Account

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers their own fate as they face the reckoning on the Day of Resurrection which they were wont to deny:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.'* (Verse 20)

This is a fast moving scene, yet it has a profound, telling effect. The scene brings them before the fire, but just before they are driven into it, they are told the reasons which determined their fate in this way: "*You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure.*" They had their fair share of good things, but they used them all up in the life of this world, keeping nothing back for their future life. In fact, they did not reckon that there would even be a future life. Therefore, they enjoyed these good things to the full, showing no gratitude for them and expressing no thanks to God for

granting them. They did not refrain from committing what is forbidden in order to enjoy such pleasures. Therefore, they had their full share of good things in this world, leaving themselves nothing in the life to come. They exchanged the endless life of the hereafter for the short span of life on earth. Therefore, "*today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20) Everyone who behaves with arrogance on earth does so without any right. All pride belongs to God; none belongs to any creature, no matter what position he holds. To suffer humiliation is, therefore, a just reward for arrogance and deviation from the path God has charted.

3

When Prophets Are Challenged

وَٱذْكُرْ أَخَا عَادٍ إِذْ أَنذَرَ قَوْمَهُۥ بِٱلْأَحْقَافِ
وَقَدْ خَلَتِ ٱلنُّذُرُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦٓ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.' (21)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَجِئْتَنَا لِتَأْفِكَنَا عَنْ ءَالِهَتِنَا فَأْتِنَا
بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.' (22)

قَالَ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَأُبَلِّغُكُم مَّآ أُرْسِلْتُ
بِهِۦ وَلَٰكِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰكُمْ قَوْمًا تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.' (23)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ عَارِضًا مُّسْتَقْبِلَ أَوْدِيَتِهِمْ قَالُوا۟
هَٰذَا عَارِضٌ مُّمْطِرُنَا ۖ بَلْ هُوَ مَا ٱسْتَعْجَلْتُم
بِهِۦ ۖ رِيحٌ فِيهَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering (24)

تُدَمِّرُ كُلَّ شَيْءٍۭ بِأَمْرِ رَبِّهَا فَأَصْبَحُوا۟
لَا يُرَىٰٓ إِلَّا مَسَٰكِنُهُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى
ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people. (25)

وَلَقَدْ مَكَّنَّٰهُمْ فِيمَآ إِن مَّكَّنَّٰكُمْ فِيهِ
وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ سَمْعًا وَأَبْصَٰرًا وَأَفْـِٔدَةً فَمَآ
أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَلَآ أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ وَلَآ
أَفْـِٔدَتُهُم مِّن شَىْءٍ إِذْ كَانُوا۟ يَجْحَدُونَ
بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked. (26)

وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا مَا حَوْلَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ
وَصَرَّفْنَا ٱلْـَٔايَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. (27)

فَلَوْلَا نَصَرَهُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ
قُرْبَانًا ءَالِهَةً ۖ بَلْ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنْهُمْ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ
إِفْكُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions. (28)

Overview

This third part of the *sūrah* addresses its central question in a different way to that of its earlier parts. It speaks of the fate of the ʿĀd and other townships around Makkah. Towards Hūd, their brother, whom God sent as His messenger, they adopted a similar attitude to that of the idolaters in Makkah towards Muḥammad, their brother and God's messenger. Both raised the same objections. Hūd answered them in the splendid manner of prophets, but within the limits of his human ability and the mission assigned to him. When they paid no heed to his warnings, they were smitten by God's punishment that left them utterly destroyed. Although they were more powerful, wealthy and intelligent than the Makkan unbelievers, none of this was of any avail to them. Nor did their alleged deities, which they claimed would bring them closer to God, avail them of anything.

The Makkan unbelievers are also reminded of the fate their own ancestors met, given they too had adopted the same attitude. They are told in no uncertain terms that they will suffer the same fate. The *sūrah* also shows them the line the Divine message follows: it is consistent and unchanging. Likewise, God's law applies to all and does not change. We see the tree of faith with firm roots, its branches stretched wide across the generations. It is the same faith for all times and communities.

At the Sand Dunes

> *Remember that brother of the ʿĀd who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.'* (Verse 21)

The brother of the ʿĀd is the Prophet Hūd (peace be upon him) who is mentioned here by his position as a brother to his people. This highlights the relation of mutual love and care that existed between him and his people, which should have made them more responsive to his call and motivated them to think well of him and what he taught. The same bond existed between Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his people who similarly opposed him.

The ʿĀd used to build their homes on the high sand dunes in a valley in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, said to be near Ḥadramawt.[1] God in His glory directs His messenger to remember Hūd and how he warned his people at the Valley of the Sand Dunes. This to give him encouragement as he realizes that Hūd was similarly rejected by his people. Such remembrance also serves to remind the Makkan unbelievers of the fate of those earlier communities that rejected God's messages.

Hūd warned his people, but he was not the first messenger to warn his community. Other messengers did the same before him: "*Other warners have come and gone both before and after him.*" Those messengers came close to him in time and place as also far from him. The chain of God's messages is a continuous one, and the warnings are given at all times. This whole issue is familiar to all. Hūd gave them the same warnings given by all messengers to their communities: "*Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.*" (Verse 21) Worshipping God means faith at heart and a code of living. To discard all this inevitably leads to terrible suffering in this present life, or in the life to come, or in both. When reference is made to a day, as it is made here, it means the Day of Judgement when the suffering is far greater and more terrible.

What response did Hūd's people give him for his caring instructions and warnings? "*They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 22) Their response betrays mistrust, lack of understanding, rejection of the warning, hastening the punishment he warned them against, arrogance and a persistent adherence to false beliefs.

For his part, Hūd receives all this with patience, showing the manners that behove a prophet. He makes no personal claims as he outlines his attitude and makes his limits clear to them: "*He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.'*" (Verse 23) I am giving you this

1. Recent reports based on satellite pictures suggest that a whole city is buried at a place close to Oman in the Empty Quarter, which means that it is to the west of Ḥadramout, a large province in Yemen. From the description given, this city might well be where the ʿĀd lived. – Editor's note.

warning as I was commanded to do, but I do not know when such punishment falls, or what form it will take. All this is known to God alone. I am only delivering a message entrusted to me, making no further claim. "*But I see that you are insolent people.*" (Verse 23) What could be more foolish and insolent than to give such a hostile reception to a brother who is only offering sincere and honest advice?

The *sūrah* gives no further details of the long argument that took place between Hūd and his people, moving straight to report on the fate they suffered. This is intended here as a reply to their challenge and hastening of punishment:

> *When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people.* (Verses 24–25)

Reports suggest that the ʿĀd suffered a period of intense heat, coupled with absence of rain. They endured this unbearable climate for some time. Then God sent them clouds, and they were delighted. They went into the surrounding valleys hoping that rain would quickly ensue. Yet the truth of what the clouds brought signified their ultimate demise: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, this stormwind is described as "*furiously raging.*" (69: 6) Another description of it states that it "*spared nothing of what it came upon, but caused it all to become like bones dead and decayed.*" (51: 42)

The Qur'ānic text depicts the wind as if it was alive, aware of what it was doing, fulfilling its orders to destroy everything in its wake: "*which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" This is a universal fact which the Qur'ān is wont to impress on people. This universe is alive, and every force in it is aware of what God wants of it, proceeding to fulfil it. Man is one of these forces. When he is a true believer, his heart becomes open to greater knowledge and he becomes

able to understand more of the universal forces around him and respond to them. This opens the way to a mutual response that differs from what people generally know of life and understanding. Everything around us has life, but we do not appreciate this because shapes and forms limit our understanding. The universe around us is full of secrets which are appreciated by faculties of understanding, even though they cannot be seen by our eyes.

The stormwind fulfilled the task assigned to it, destroying everything. Thus, "*when the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings.*" (Verse 25) No trace of the 'Ād was left behind, not even their animals or belongings. Everything disappeared. All that was left were desolate dwellings, empty, lacking all signs of life: "*Thus do We requite guilty people.*" (Verse 25) This rule applies to all guilty people.

Useless Power

With this image of death and destruction, the *sūrah* addresses the present generation who follow in the 'Ād's footsteps, giving them a telling reminder:

> *We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26)

Those very people who were destroyed by the stormwind had once been established in the land in a way that had not been granted to the Arabs of Makkah. This is a general reference to what they had been given of power, wealth, knowledge and life's luxuries. They were also endowed with sharp faculties of hearing and sight, as well as hearts. The Qur'ān uses different ways of referring to the faculty of understanding, citing it alternatively as heart, mind or brain, when all refer to the same ability. Yet none of these faculties was of any use as the 'Ād rendered them useless when "*they persisted in denying God's*

revelations." (Verse 26) Denying God's revelations suppresses senses and faculties and screens them from His source of light and understanding, blunting them altogether. "*They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26) This refers to the punishment they were warned about and which they derided.

The lesson to be drawn here is that no one should ever be too proud of his power, wealth or knowledge, thinking that these can afford him absolute protection. We see in what happened to the 'Ād a natural power being used against people, destroying them and all that they enjoyed. Nothing was left of them except their empty and desolate dwellings.

Winds are a universal power operating all the time in accordance with the system God has placed in the universe. He may use them to destroy certain places as part of His overall scheme of things. There is no need, then, within this context, to upset or disrupt the universal system, as some people mistakenly suggest. The One who has put the system in place is the One who has determined the fates of individuals and communities. Every single thing, event, movement and person are taken into account within the overall system and the operation of His law. Like all other universal powers, winds are controlled by God, fulfilling the role He has assigned to them and to the universe. The same applies to humans at whose disposal God has placed certain universal powers. When people undertake something, they are in fact fulfilling the role assigned to them by God, for His purpose. Their freedom of action and choice is part of the overall law that ensures universal harmony. Indeed everything is set according to a fine measure, with nothing falling short or causing disruption.

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by drawing people's attention to the lessons learnt from the fates suffered by the communities in the areas not far from around Makkah:

> *We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verses 27–28)

God destroyed the communities who rejected the messengers sent to them, such as the ʿĀd in the Valley of the Sand Dunes in the south of Arabia, the Thamūd at Ḥijr in the north, the people of Sheba in Yemen, the Madyan whose former homes the Makkans passed on their way to Syria and the people of Lot whose dwellings were along the route the Arabs took on their summer journey to the north. God gave His message to these people in different ways so as to give such erring communities a chance to repent and change their ways. They, however, persisted with their errors and so incurred God's punishment, which was inflicted on them in various ways. What happened to them was so serious that it became part of the history one generation reports to the next. The idolaters in Makkah were aware of this, given they passed by these areas on their travels.

Their attentions are thus drawn to the real facts. God destroyed the unbelievers before them while their deities, whom they claimed drew them nearer to God, were utterly unable to save them: "*Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help?*" (Verse 28) They could not furnish them with any support. "*Indeed, they utterly failed them.*" They left them to their fate. Indeed, they did not know how to reach them, let alone spare them God's punishment. "*Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verse 28) All their claims about so-called deities are lies and fabrications. These too will inevitably be destroyed. What end, then, did those Arabs who took false deities for themselves expect?

4

Jinn Listening to the Qur'ān

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَآ إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ
ٱلْقُرْءَانَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنصِتُوا۟ ۖ فَلَمَّا
قُضِىَ وَلَّوْا۟ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِم مُّنذِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

We sent to you a group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. (29)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰقَوْمَنَآ إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَٰبًا
أُنزِلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ
يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِىٓ إِلَى ٱلْحَقِّ وَإِلَىٰ طَرِيقٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. (30)

يَٰقَوْمَنَآ أَجِيبُوا۟ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَغْفِرْ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُجِرْكُم
مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

'Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. (31)

وَمَن لَّا يُجِبْ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ فَلَيْسَ بِمُعْجِزٍ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَيْسَ لَهُۥ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

'He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.' (32)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْيَ بِخَلْقِهِنَّ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَىٰ
أَن يُحْيِيَ الْمَوْتَىٰ ۚ بَلَىٰ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ
قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (33)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَلَى النَّارِ أَلَيْسَ
هَٰذَا بِالْحَقِّ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّنَا ۚ قَالَ فَذُوقُوا
الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.' (34)

فَاصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُولُو الْعَزْمِ مِنَ
الرُّسُلِ وَلَا تَسْتَعْجِل لَّهُمْ ۚ كَأَنَّهُمْ
يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ مَا يُوعَدُونَ لَمْ يَلْبَثُوا
إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِّن نَّهَارٍ ۚ بَلَاغٌ ۚ فَهَلْ يُهْلَكُ
إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers? (35)

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* presents a different way of tackling the basic question of faith. It tells us the story of a group of *jinn* who heard the Qur'ān being recited and who listened to it. They felt, at heart, that it was the word of truth and believed in it instantly. They then rushed to their own people calling on them to believe, giving

them the good news of earning forgiveness for their past sins and warning them against turning away and persisting in error. The effect of the Qur'ān on this group of *jinn* is clearly indicated in their advice to each other to hearken to its recitation, as well as the report they gave to their people about it, urging them to believe too. Reporting the story in this way should touch the hearts of human beings to whom the message of the Qur'ān is firstly addressed. It should have a telling and profound effect on them. At the same time, a reference to the link between the book given to Moses and the Qur'ān is mentioned by the *jinn*. This is a fact ignored by humans but highlighted by the *jinn*. Again this has a profound effect which is consistent with the message of the *sūrah*.

The *jinn*'s discourse also refers to the open book of the universe, testifying to God's great power manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and His ability to bring the dead back to life. Needless to say, people argue endlessly about this, often denying it altogether.

In the context of resurrection, the *sūrah* portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement speaking of the time when the unbelievers are brought before the fire of hell. Finally, the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity and not to hasten their punishment. Rather, he should leave them to live their lives until the appointed time, which is bound to come soon, in no more than an hour of a day, during which the message is given.

The *Jinn* Listening to the Qur'ān

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error. Are they not aware that*

God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (Verses 29–33)

Those *jinn* who listened to the Qur'ān in silence made a comment that embraced faith in its entirety: belief in God's revelation; the unity of the message given in the Torah and the Qur'ān; acknowledging the truth to which the Qur'ān guides; belief in the Day of Resurrection and which actions earn forgiveness and which incur punishment; acknowledging God's power of creation and His overall authority over all creatures, and recognizing the link between creation in the first place and bringing the dead back to life. These are the principles the *sūrah* discusses from start to finish. They are presented here by the *jinn*, in a voice that comes from beyond man's world.

The fact that the Qur'ān mentions how a number of *jinn* were sent to listen to the Qur'ān as the Prophet recited it, and reports what they did and said afterwards, is sufficient to confirm the existence of the *jinn* and the event related. It further confirms that they were able to listen to the Qur'ān in its Arabic wording as pronounced by the Prophet. It also makes clear that the *jinn* are able to accept faith or deny it, that they have the choice to follow guidance or continue in error. There is no need for any further confirmation. No person can add anything to the reliability of a fact stated by God in the Qur'ān. We, however, merely try to clarify it in our human perception.

The universe around us is full of secrets, as well as powers and creatures of which we know nothing: neither their nature, nor their shape, form or effect. We live in the midst of all these powers and secrets and every day discover some of these getting to know some of such creatures or their qualities and how they make their effect on the world around us. We are still, however, at the beginning of the road, leading to knowledge of the universe. We should bear in mind that all past generations of mankind, the present one and all future generations dwell on no more than a small particle in the vast universe, which is planet earth. When compared to human knowledge five centuries ago, what we now know when we are still just at the beginning of the road is considered stranger by far than the remarkable creatures known as

the *jinn*. Had someone told people five centuries ago anything about atomic energy, they would have considered him crazy, or at least considered his views far stranger than the *jinn*.

The secrets we discover and the knowledge we acquire remain within the limits of our human power, which is granted to us so that we can discharge our task of building life on earth, in accordance with the terms of reference set for us by God. Moreover, what we learn remains within what God has made available or subservient to us for use in fulfilment of our task. No matter how long human life on earth extends, human knowledge and discoveries will remain within this framework; i.e. the framework of what we need for the mission assigned to us when we were placed in charge of the earth, according to God's purpose and wisdom. We will discover and learn much more of the wonderful secrets and powers in the universe, compared to which the secrets of the atom may appear like child's play, but we will remain within the limited area of knowledge assigned to man. We will remain within the limits of the Qur'ānic statement: "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (17: 85) It remains little compared to what the universe contains of secrets and facts known only to its Creator who controls all. We need to contrast this against God's representation of His limitless knowledge: "*Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted.*" (31: 27)

Therefore, we cannot say that something belonging to the realm that lies beyond our perception, or some secret or power in the universe, certainly exists or not, or is possible or impossible, merely because it is beyond our familiar world or our human experience. We have not yet discovered all the secrets of our own physical constitution, its systems and potentials, let alone the secrets of our minds and spirits.

There may be secrets that are beyond what is meant to be revealed to us, and secrets that we are not meant to understand, even though we get to learn about their qualities or effects, or even only their existence. What is withheld from us will not, should we learn about it, benefit us in the fulfilment of our assignment on earth. Therefore, when God tells us in His words, not through our experience and acquired knowledge, about these secrets and powers, we should accept

His gift with gratitude and take it as He gives it to us, adding nothing and omitting nothing. Such knowledge comes to us directly from God, and He has chosen to give it to us in a particular measure. There is simply no other source to give us more.

On the basis of the account given in this *sūrah* and that given in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, (which most probably speaks of the same event), and from other references to the *jinn* in the Qur'ān as well as authentic *aḥādīth* referring to this event, we can understand certain facts about the *jinn*. We will add nothing further.

To sum up these facts we say that there is a type of God's creation named the *jinn*, which is created out of fire. This is evidenced by the Qur'ānic reports of *Iblīs*'s statement in reference to Adam: "*I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay.*" (7: 12) *Iblīs*, or Satan, belongs to the *jinn*, as God says: "*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so* Iblīs, *who belonged to the* jinn *and he disobeyed his Lord's command.*" (18: 50) This type of creation has different qualities to those of humans. One of these is that it is created out of fire, and another is that the *jinn* can see humans while humans cannot see them. In reference to *Iblīs*, who belongs to the *jinn*, God says: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This last statement also tells us that the *jinn* have their own groupings and communities, which are similar to human communities.

The *jinn* can live on earth, although we do not know where. When He turned them out of heaven, God said to both Adam and *Iblīs*: "*Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while.*" (2: 36) The *jinn* who were made subservient to Solomon performed for him certain works on land which, by necessity, meant that they had whatever was necessary for them to live on earth. Likewise, they can live and survive away from this planet. The Qur'ān reports a statement made by some of the *jinn* which says: "*We ascended to high heaven and found it filled with mighty guards and flames. We used to sit eavesdropping, but now eavesdroppers find flames lying in wait for them.*" (72: 8–9)

The *jinn* can also influence the understanding of humans, and they are given leave to lead such humans as go astray, but not those who are

God's true servants. In the Qur'ānic account of the exchange between God and *Iblīs*, the latter said: "*I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants.*" (38: 82–83) Other texts also confirm this, but we do not know how the *jinn* whisper to humans and influence them, nor what tools they use in the process. They can hear man and understand his language. This is clearly the case when this group of *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, understood it and were influenced by it. Like humans, the *jinn* can follow Divine guidance or go astray. As reported in *Sūrah* 72, this group of *jinn* said: "*Some of us surrender themselves to God and some are wrongdoers. Those that surrender themselves have attained to consciousness of what is right; whereas the wrongdoers are indeed the fuel of hell.*" (72: 14–15) Moreover, those of them who listened to the Qur'ān went straight to their people and called on them to accept the message of Islam, having themselves accepted it and learnt what their people had not yet learnt.

This is all that we can say with certainty about the *jinn*. We should not add to it anything that lacks supporting evidence. The event to which the present verses of the *sūrah* refer, as does, in all probability, *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, is confirmed by several reports. Here, we will quote the most authentic of these.

"Ibn 'Abbās said: The Prophet neither recited anything to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. The Prophet went with a number of his Companions aiming for the 'Ukāẓ Market. By that time, the *jinn* were blocked from eavesdropping in the skies and flames were set against them. When they went to their people, they told them of the situation. Some of them said: 'You have been stopped from eavesdropping for something that must have taken place. Travel, therefore, throughout the earth and try to find out what has happened to cause this.' Groups of them travelled in every direction, searching for the cause that blocked them from eavesdropping. The company that went to Tihāmah drew close to the Prophet as he was at the Nakhlah Valley, aiming for 'Ukāẓ Market. He was leading the dawn prayer, with his Companions in the congregation. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān in his prayer. Then they said to one another: 'This is indeed what blocked you from eavesdropping in the skies.' They then went to their people and said to them: '*We have heard a*

wondrous discourse, guiding towards consciousness of what is right, and so we have come to believe in it.' (72: 1–2) God subsequently revealed this *sūrah* to the Prophet which included what the *jinn* said." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.]

Ibn Mas'ūd was asked whether any of the Prophet's Companions was with him on the night when the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān. He replied: "None of us accompanied him. We were with him one night when we missed him. We looked for him in the nearby valleys and paths. When we did not find him we thought that he might have been carried away or assassinated. Ours was an extremely terrible night then. In the morning we saw him coming towards us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said to him: 'messenger of God! We missed you and searched for you. When we could not find you we had a terrible night.' He said: 'Someone came to me with a call from the *jinn*, and I went with him and read the Qur'ān to them.' He then took us to show us their traces and where they had their fires. They asked him for food and he said to them: 'You may have the bones of all animals at the slaughter of which God's name is invoked. When you hold a bone in your hand, it will be to you as though it has all the meat it can carry. Every dropping serves as fodder for your cattle.' The Prophet said to us: 'Do not, then, use these to clean yourself when you go to do stools.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq narrates the *jinn* story after the Prophet's journey to Ṭā'if where he went to visit the Thaqīf tribe, seeking their support to deliver his message. By that time, Abū Ṭālib, his uncle who had provided him with protection against attack had died and the Prophet was now subjected to much harm and hostility. The Thaqīf, however, answered him very rudely and set their young lads and servants against him. In this way, the Prophet was stoned to the extent that both his feet bled. At this point, he prayed to God, making the following passionate appeal:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a

distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?

If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.[2]

After his account of the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if, Ibn Isḥāq adds: "When the Prophet gave up hope of any positive response from the Thaqīf, he returned to Makkah. When he was at the valley of Nakhlah, he rose up in the middle of the night to pray. It was then that the group of *jinn* God mentioned in the Qur'ān came to him. They were, as I was told, seven in number and came from among the *jinn* of Nuṣaybīn. They listened to his recitation. When he finished his prayer, they went straight to their people to warn them, having believed in Islam and the Qur'ān. God then related what happened to the Prophet in verses 29–32 of *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, and also in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*."

Ibn Kathīr comments on this last report by Ibn Isḥāq, saying: "This is correct, but the time at which Ibn Isḥāq says it occurred is questionable. The *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān in the early days of its revelation, as indicated by the *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn ʿAbbās, while the Prophet went on his journey to Ṭā'if after his uncle's death, which means only one or two years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, as indicated by Ibn Isḥāq himself and others. However, God knows best."

There are many other reports concerning this event. From all these, we rely on the first by Ibn ʿAbbās, mentioned above, because it is the one that fits most perfectly with the Qur'ānic texts speaking about the event. Moreover, it clearly states that the Prophet learnt of what took place through what was revealed to him and that he neither saw nor

2. The story is given in detail in: Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 178–182. – Editor's note.

felt the presence of the *jinn*. Moreover, this *ḥadīth* is the most authentic of all these reports, having the most reliable chain of transmission. As to the point that the Prophet learnt of the event through the Qur'ān, Ibn Isḥāq's version agrees with this. It is further supported by what the Qur'ān mentions about the *jinn* being able to see us but not the reverse: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27)

A Telling Warning

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.* (Verse 29)

It was, then, a purposeful act of God's that He sent this group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān; in other words, it was not mere coincidence. God wanted the *jinn* to know about His final message, just as they had earlier learnt about Moses' message. According to His design, some of them will then believe and spare themselves punishment in hell, which is the abode of unbelievers whether *jinn* or humans.

The *sūrah* draws before our eyes an image of this group, between three and ten *jinn*, as they listened to the Qur'ān. It paints for us their feelings as it was being recited: an overwhelming awe leading to submission and action. "*When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!'*" This short sentence gives a clear impression of their attitude as they hearkened to the Qur'ānic recitation. Then, "*When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (Verse 29) This sentence confirms the effect the Qur'ān had on them. They listened in complete silence, attentions focused throughout the recitation. When it was over, they returned at speed to their own people. They felt that what they had heard must be immediately told and passed on. Their people needed to know so that they could be warned. It is a situation where one is highly influenced by something which motivates him to immediate action that seeks to spread the benefit and to get others to adopt the same serious attitude: "*Our people, they said, we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after*

Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path." (Verse 30)

The first thing they said to their people was that the revelation they had heard had been bestowed from on high after the book of Moses and that it confirmed the scriptures before it. Thus, they knew about Moses' book and recognized, once they heard the Qur'ān, that it was closely related to the Torah. What they heard of the Qur'ān might not have mentioned Moses or his book, but its very nature suggested that it came from the same source. This acknowledgement by the *jinn*, who are relatively unaffected by factors that operate in human life, has a clear and profound import.

They give expression to their feelings as they listened to the Qur'ān: "*It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) The truth and the guidance provided by the Qur'ān have a profound effect on people. Only a sealed heart and an arrogant, stubborn soul, motivated by selfish interests, will resist it. Hence, it had an immediate and telling effect on the hearts of those *jinn*, prompting them to give this testimony of its truth. They proceeded with their warning to their people, full of enthusiasm and expressing their firm conviction of the truth they had learnt. In other words, this recitation of the Qur'ān placed a duty on them to inform and warn others: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) They considered the revelation of the Qur'ān a call on everyone who learned of it, whether human or *jinn*, to believe. They also considered Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), to be the one who called them to believe in God merely by reciting the Qur'ān. Hence their appeal to their people: "*Respond to God's call and have faith in Him.*" (Verse 31) They also believed in the Day of Judgement and learnt that belief and positive response to the Divine call ensured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from punishment. So they imparted this news to their people.

Ibn Isḥāq considers that this concludes what the *jinn* said to their people, but the context suggests that the next two verses were also stated by them. We think that this is more likely, particularly the next verse: "*He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 32) This is a logical complement to the warning given by the *jinn* to their people whom they advised to believe in the new message. It is also likely that they explained that a negative response leads to dire consequences. No one who rejects the Divine call can escape God: He is always able to inflict punishment. The unbeliever will find none to support him against God or protect him from His punishment. He is, therefore, indeed in manifest error.

Likewise, the next verse most probably reports more of what the *jinn* said, as they wondered at those who reject God's call, thinking that they are immune from punishment or that there will be neither reckoning nor requital: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33)

This is a reference to the book of the universe mentioned at the *sūrah*'s outset. The Qur'ān often provides such a close connection between a direct statement and a similar one occurring within a story or historical account, ensuring the confirmation of the same fact from two sources. The book of the universe testifies to His great might. It imparts to us the feeling that bringing the dead back to life is easy. This is what is intended here. That this point is made here in the form of a question and a reply makes it more emphatic. This is followed by the general comment that God has power over all things. Thus, bringing the dead back to life is included within His limitless power.

As Resurrection Takes Place

Having referred to bringing the dead back to life, the *sūrah* paints a picture of reckoning and accountability as though we see all this before our eyes:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'* (Verse 34)

The scene here begins with a narrative, or an introduction to a narrative: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire…*" The audience are waiting for the narrative describing what will happen, but instead of a description, the scene is present before our eyes, with a dialogue taking place: "*Is this not the truth?*" What a question! It falls like a hammer on the heads of those who used to reject the truth, ridicule the message and hasten the punishment they were warned against. Now they are face to face with the truth they used to deny. They arrive at an answer, in fear and humility: "*Yes, by our Lord.*" Now they swear '*by our Lord*', the very Lord whose messenger they rejected and whose Lordship they denied. Now they swear by Him affirming the truth they once denied.

At this point, the matter reaches maximum rebuke. The dialogue is over and the issue is settled: "*He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'*" (Verse 34) It is just an answer to a simple question: the crime is seen in full clarity and the criminal admits his guilt. The outcome is settled.

This scene is portrayed very speedily. This is deliberate because the confrontation is decisive. There is no room for argument. They used to deny the truth; now they acknowledge it and are made to suffer the consequences.

Following this scene that decisively spells out the fate of the unbelievers, and the one that touches the hearts of a group from a different world, the *sūrah* makes its final statement. It instructs the Prophet to remain patient with them and not to hasten their punishment. He has seen what awaits them, which is close at hand:

> *Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?* (Verse 35)

Every word in this verse is charged with meaning; every phrase draws a whole world of images and impressions and refers to great issues and

values. "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This is a directive given to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who had shown more patience than anyone can tolerate while suffering persecution at the hands of his people. He grew up an orphan in their midst, then lost his guardian as well as every human support, one by one, losing his father, mother, grandfather, uncle as well as the wife who was the symbol of loving care. Thus he was free of all preoccupations, dedicating himself totally to his message. Yet he received at the hands of his unbelieving relatives more trouble than at the hands of others unrelated to him. He had to approach tribe after tribe, as well as individuals, seeking support in delivering his message but only meeting with rejection time after time. Some even set their henchmen against him and he was stoned and injured. His response was nothing more than a passionate appeal to his Lord, as quoted earlier.

Yet after all this, the Prophet is given this directive by his Lord: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This shows just how hard and difficult the call to Islam is. A man like Muḥammad, the symbol of dedication, unshakeable belief and purity of heart, still needs this Divine directive to remain patient and not to hasten God's punishment of the adversaries of his message. The hardships he met along this road required that he be comforted and counselled to remain patient. He also needed a sweet dose of Divine compassion, followed by reassurance: "*On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day.*" (Verse 35) It is all a short duration, an hour of a day. This whole life is so short and trivial that all the effects it has on hearts and souls is no more than the effect of an hour in a day. Then they will meet their inevitable fate and abide endlessly.

This hour of a life serves only to make things clear before the fate is sealed: "*This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35) Certainly not. God wishes no injustice for anyone. Every advocate of the Divine message must remain patient in adversity. Last as much as it may, the adversity will be no longer than an hour of a day, and then everything is settled.